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AUTHOR Oludaja, Bayo
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ABSTRACT

As the need for intercultural communication courses gains more recognition and support in college and university curricula there are also growing concerns about effective methods for teaching the courses. The value of actual intercultural experiences as a strong component of an intercultural communication course should not be questioned. If, however, a college or university is located in a culturally homogeneous community, available campus resources can be used to enhance students' knowledge of other cultures. The objectives of an intercultural communication course are to: (1) understand how culture and communication interface in areas such as beliefs, values, attitudes, roles, language, tradition, and other aspects of human behavior; (2) become more aware of their own culture-bound assumptions; (3) appreciate more of their own culture while being open to further enrichment by other people's culture; and (4) understand the role of communication in the socialization process of some specific cultures. Experiential activities which can be used include: "conversational partners" in which one student meets and converses with two members of another culture; using international students as guest speakers; and having students from different campus organizations meet for an evening of celebrating diversity. These activities and the positive responses to the activities make the challenge of teaching intercultural communication both manageable and fun for all involved. (RS)

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EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Bayo Oludaja
Speech Department
Northwest Missouri State University
Maryville MO 64468

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EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As the need for intercultural communication courses gains more recognition and support in college and university curricula there are also growing concerns about effective methods for teaching the courses. Of particular concern is the provision of a reasonable balance between theoretical knowledge and practical application.

In her effort to answer the question, "What is the mix of theoretical concepts and applied skills in the basic intercultural communication course?" Kiser (1991) found that "most basic courses are more theoretically oriented, and devote less time to developing skills through actual intercultural interaction" (p. 3). After examining some of the popular textbooks on intercultural communication, Ady & Yu (1991) also came to the conclusion that "the general orientation of those texts is toward the fulfillment of the demand for enhanced conceptual understanding of intercultural communication, even though they all tend to provide specific information about certain specific cultures" (p. 3).

The value of actual intercultural experiences as a strong component of an intercultural communication course should not be in question. Ruben (1976) and Harris & Moran (1987) have pointed out the need to strive for behavioral change in addition to cognitive learning. Lynch, Modgil, and Modgil (1992) in their summary of Allport's (1954) contact theory explained that under certain conditions, "one's

behaviour toward members of a disliked social category will become more positive after direct interpersonal interactions" (p. 214). If the basis of prejudiced attitudes is often the fear of other groups (Mays et al., 1975), it is understandable that guided contact between groups can result in positive attitudes which may in turn spill over into positive behaviors toward members of other groups. Thus there is no better way to enhance behavioral change in students than through the provision of actual intercultural experiences.

Most teachers of intercultural communication courses recognize the value of experiential activities; yet, as Klopf (1991) has noted, much of what takes place in many intercultural communication classes is out-of-context learning. That is, students learn by listening to the professor's lectures, reading the textbook, and doing some classroom exercises, but without actually conversing or interacting with people from other cultures.

The imbalance between knowledge and performance may be due partly to problems beyond professors' control. One such problem could be that a college or university is located in a culturally homogeneous community with very few international students or faculty. Another problem could be that the few international students might not enroll in the intercultural communication course. Or in some cases where a few international students enroll, the students may not be called upon to share with their classmates some of their cultural experiences. And it is not often that international students

will take it upon themselves to ask to be heard considering the power distance that exists between professors and students in some cultures.

Given the reality that there is not much the professor can do to increase the cultural diversity of his or her community and of his or her class, what can the professor do to provide valuable intercultural experiences for his or her students? In an attempt to answer this question three years ago, the author of this paper began a practice of using available campus resources to enhance students' knowledge of other cultures. This paper is a summary of the way the practice has evolved. First, the paper gives a description of the course and its objectives. Second, it describes the experiential activities the author has used in his classes. And third, the paper gives some of the students' responses to the activities.

Course Description

The intercultural communication course taught by the author is a 225-level course. It now enrolls twenty-five to thirty students each semester. The majority are Caucasian north American students. The percentage of African-American students has ranged from 0 - 8%, while that of international students has varied from 0 - 24%. The objectives of the course are to help students: 1) understand how culture and communication interface in areas such as beliefs, values, attitudes, roles, language, traditions, and other aspects of human behavior; 2) become more aware of their own

culture-bound assumptions; 3) appreciate more their own culture while being open to the possibility of further enrichment by other people's cultures; and 4) understand the role of communication in the socialization process of some specific cultures.

Some of the course requirements include regular class attendance, three exams, reflection papers, and a group project. While students are allowed to form their own groups for the project, they are strongly encouraged to make the group reflect the extent to which the class is diverse. The group project options are designed to get students involved in intercultural encounters. Since course activities are intended to facilitate meaningful application of concepts and principles outlined in the text and lectures, students are asked to submit short papers that contain their thoughtful responses to different activities.

Experiential Activities

Conversation Partners: This activity began as a cooperative venture with the Preparatory English Program. The Program had forty Japanese students whose primary purpose was to learn the English language as a prerequisite for admission to a regular college degree program. During that semester, there were twenty students enrolled in the intercultural communication course. All of them were Caucasian North Americans from the Midwest.

The author of this paper approached the director of the Preparatory English Program and suggested that the students in

the program be allowed to visit with the students in the intercultural communication course. It was pointed out that the students in the Program would benefit from the visit as it would help them practice their use of English. In turn, the students in the intercultural communication course would benefit from direct contact with people from a different culture. The director of the program agreed and an arrangement was made for both groups to meet under the guidance of three instructors. After some general remarks and instructions, the students were asked to form groups of three (two Japanese and one American in each group). They spent much of the time visiting with one another. The last few minutes were given to concluding remarks. The interaction was so successful that some of the students in the intercultural communication course volunteered to be conversational partners for their "new friends." But as one of them later wrote in her response paper, "It was strange. For the first time in my life, I felt like a minority in my own culture. Now I know a little bit what it feels like to be a minority." This author was so encouraged by the outcome that he decided to build such contacts into the course requirement for subsequent semesters.

Guest Speakers: As enrollment in the intercultural communication course grew, it became more difficult to keep the conversational partners assignment going. So this author decided to invite international students to come and talk to his class about their cultures. The guest speakers were given some guidelines concerning the issues that have been discussed

in class so they could better prepare to address such issues from their culture's perspectives. The students enrolled in the course were given at least a week's notice so they could prepare to interact with the guest speakers. They were also given some guidelines for writing their reflection papers on their interactions with the guest speakers. Guests have come from countries such as Japan, Spain, Germany, Pakistan, Malaysia, Sudan, Somalia, Jordan, Macao, Brazil, and Turkey. In addition, some African-Americans and some Hispanic-Americans have been invited. Some Caucasian North Americans who have been abroad as exchange students have also been invited. Some of the students' responses to the guest speakers are presented in the next section of this paper.

Celebrate Diversity: This activity was undertaken in collaboration with the director of the Student Support Services Program on campus. We invited students from different campus organizations to join in an evening of celebrating diversity. The evening began with introductory remarks followed by refreshments, small group discussions, and closing remarks. Because of the planning and coordination necessary for this activity, we have been able to do it only once in a semester. The participants enjoyed it so much that some of them have suggested that we do it every month.

This section of the paper has been devoted to brief descriptions of the experiential activities that the author considers useful in enhancing intercultural interactions. His judgment of the success or failure of the activities has been

based mainly on the feedback from the students who participated in the activities. Because of the number of students involved, it would be unwieldy to try and hear every voice, but the following excerpts are truly representative of the entire participants.

Students' Responses

These excerpts have been taken from students' reflection papers on and responses to the last two activities described in the preceding section of this paper.

Responses to Guest Speakers

"I only witnessed one stereotype that bothered me. She stated that Americans were sort of unfeeling when it came to the fact that we didn't inform them about the dangers of the weather in the United States. She also said that Americans tend to mask their feelings with politeness and many generalities. These were really the only stereotypes I could pick out of her statements. I know she opened my eyes a little more on the plight of a new international student coming to the U.S. for the first time."

"She was a great speaker and it was easy to pay attention to her because she made it interesting. She made me look back and see how I act around foreign people. It will be easier now that I have somewhat of an idea about their feelings. Speakers such as _____ are a great addition to any class to help students get a broader cultural view."

"It is really an experience to have guest speakers from different parts of the world because it not only makes one learn; it MAKES ONE UNDERSTAND AND ASSOCIATE."

"I had a difficult time understanding them when they spoke but I saw they shared this difficulty. I think it would be very frustrating to come to a foreign country and try to associate with people that are so different from what you are used to. I think I would probably find people from my native country to associate with....
"This class has prepared me for my trip to Jamaica this summer. When speakers came to our class and talked about their difficulties, I was given some idea about what to expect."

"I never realized until now how our slang could confuse someone from another country. Great job and let's have more

speakers!"

"I really didn't know anything about his country before he visited and I found it completely enjoyable! Let's learn more about other places. It makes me want to visit!!"

"Abortion, a controversial issue in the United States, used to be totally illegal in Spain; but now it is only legal in cases that involve rape, risk to mother, or deformity in the unborn child. Aspects like these just go to show people that no matter what someone looks like on the outside, we are basically all the same on the inside."

"I feel that the presentations from exchange students are very helpful in exposing us to new outlooks on life and meeting people from other cultures."

"I now realize that American kids are not as free as I thought they were. However, there is no doubt that teenagers in my country are facing still more restrictions than most of the American kids do, due to our traditionally conservative Chinese culture."

"Although we have some historical and environmental differences, I feel that if we are open-minded, like we were in class, and if we have a chance to share, we all can possibly be friends."

Responses to "Celebrate Diversity"

"This was an opportunity for me to meet more people and understand their culture a little better."

"I enjoyed this event and feel that I have met many special people. I'm sure I have met a few friends, too!"

"This is the first time that I really have open interaction with Americans who are totally unknown to me. The matter is that it involves group interaction. I do have group discussion in class but it is cold and very formal."

"I think it was a great evening because it brought people from different cultures together and gave us an opportunity to learn about other people and their culture."

"It was fun. It was good that we had the guideline to follow. My biggest problem is I don't know what to talk about with new people."

"It was difficult for me because my ability of English is not enough to discussion." (Quoted verbatim).

"I enjoyed myself. Everything was great. Food was superb.

We should do it again."

"I think it was very interesting. I learned some new things about different cultures and reasons why people from other countries travel here to go to school."

"This was an excellent event. I had a chance to meet new people and just talk to those that are from different places. This was a good chance to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures. The group discussions were very interesting and fun. The food was good also. It was a good chance to communicate with our peers."

Conclusion

The challenge of bridging the gap between what Ruben (1976) calls "verbal/cognitive competence" (knowledge) and "behavioral competence" (performance) is ever present in the teaching of intercultural communication. With most colleges and universities facing budget limitations and other constraints, the likelihood of adopting some expensive cross-cultural training model as a means of bridging the gap is shrinking. Yet we need not and should not flee from the challenge. Instead, we can tap into whatever limited campus resources we have and do the best we can with them. Fortunately, the trend on most campuses is that there is a rise in the number of international students enrolling. For example, Gibson and Hanna (1992) report that international students' enrollment jumped from 34,232 in 1954/55 to 36,187 in 1987/88. Since these students, in a sense, represent their various cultures, we can seek their cooperation and the cooperation and collaboration of pertinent special programs on our campuses in providing the experiential dimension that is

needed in the intercultural communication course. It is the experience of this author that such cooperation and collaboration is rewarding for all who are involved.

The activities discussed in this paper and the responses to those activities make the challenge of teaching intercultural communication both manageable and fun. As Ady & Yu (1991) enjoin us, "Let us not be satisfied with an emphasis on cognitive learning activities to the exclusion of experiential instruction" (p. 7). We can not justify such exclusion any longer since on many campuses the world is literally at our doorsteps!

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